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Developments in the Early Years of the University Regent Theatre:
A Program of University College -- Syracuse University
(1958-1973)

Alexander N. Charters
Dean of University College 1952-1964

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In 1958 Hugh Gregg, Vice President of Business Affairs as well as a real estate officer of Syracuse University, informed me that Syracuse University had purchased the Regent Theatre from Kallett Theater at 820 E Genesee Street, two blocks east of University College. He also told me that I would be running it. At the time, the Regent Theatre was located in what was then considered an undesirable location around the corner of East Genesee Street at that time was a commercial venture that showed movies.

Almost immediately after taking over the theatre, Madelon Beyle of the Skaneateles Lyric Company contacted me about conducting a program during the summer of 1958 at the Regent Theatre. It had a program the previous summer at Skaneateles and wanted a new location. There had been no time to schedule a program in the Regent Theatre for the summer and so it was agreed that the Skaneateles Lyric Company would use the Regent Theatre as an independent organization under its Board of Directors. I sat in on its Board meetings. It was a successful season and apparently the debt from the previous season was paid off. No charge was

Caveat: The files of University College are missing. Accordingly, this statement is written from limited information in the files of Alexander N. Charters and his recollections. This statement is a synopsis of developments while he was Dean of University College. Louis Kempton, Business Manager of University College during this period who had knowledge of all the operations of University College, contributed significantly. We are grateful to him. Jim Scott, Producing Director of the Syracuse Repertory Theatre, reviewed this statement and made useful suggestions.

made by University College for the use of the Regent Theatre. University College elicited considerable community attention to its new downtown Theatre.

University College, the Adult Education Division of Syracuse University, administered the Regent Theatre as one of its programs for adult students. Each year the deficits were assumed by University College. The Regent Theatre was administered under the Policies and Procedures of University College and some modifications were made in them so that they were appropriate for the development of the Regent Theatre. When University College was assigned the Regent Theatre, it was considered as an additional resource to provide programs to meet the educational needs of adult students primarily in the metropolitan Syracuse area.

After the change in ownership, the Regent Theatre began to develop a comprehensive program in education and culture to develop further programs in music, drama and film primarily for adults of the Syracuse community.

At that time, the facility had a screen for showing movies, a large but fairly narrow auditorium, a small balcony (886 seats) and a booth for movie projectors. The entrance was under a marquee on 607 East Genesee Street. There was very little space behind the screen so the stage was very limited for theatrical and musical performances.

The first manager was Steve Allen who stayed only a few months before Robert Bergeron was appointed in 1962 as a Program Administrator of University College to develop the program and manage the Theatre. Over a period of time, the title of the Program Administrator was changed to titles more appropriate to theater

Early performances included traveling shows, amateur theatre, films, travelogues, music, guest artists and young artist's series.

Over a brief period of time the name was changed to the University Regent Theatre to acknowledge Syracuse University as the new developer. University College was planning to expand the program and facilities when Rex Henriot was appointed by University College as Program Administrator for the University Regent Theatre in 1961.

Syracuse University began acquiring property in the area to provide parking for staff and audiences of the University Regent Theatre. However, the buildings, as soon as they were acquired, were used for theatre offices, work areas and other purposes. Parking facilities were postponed for many years. In 1962 the stage was expanded and a new theatrical lighting system was installed at a total cost of about \$120,000.

University College was becoming increasingly proactive in program development for the Theatre. There as growing consensus that the University Regent Theatre should move to provide more live professional performances to its list of programs.

The Drama Department of Syracuse University was increasingly interested and active in the programming in the University Regent Theatre. In 1961 Sawyer Falk, Chairman of the Drama Department expressed his interest to me in working with the University Regent Theatre. We began planning. He then went to Europe as a faculty member on an international study tour offered by International Programs of University College. He died in Paris. The interest, however, was then continued by Gerald Reidenbaugh who was appointed Chairman of the Drama Department as the successor to Sawyer Falk. The Drama Department was very well known as the producer of live performances in the Boar's Head Theater. At that time there was growing consensus that the University Regent Theatre should produce more live theater. In 1961, Rex Henriot, the Managing Director of the University Regent Theatre, and Gerald Reidenbaugh, Artistic Director, formed the New Playhouse as a program of the University

Regent Theatre and produced performances in the University Regent Theatre, especially for children in the summers of 1961-1962-1963 and 1964. It was a highly successful venture.

Some of the performances at the University Regent Theatre engaged actors from the Actors' Equity Association. One of the arrangements with the Association was that the Theatre had to provide actors with a meal between an afternoon and evening performance. Eleanor Ludwig, Director of Syracuse Conferences at University College, organized a group of volunteer women to prepare and serve these meals as necessary. This group became a strong and significant resource to the University Regent Theatre and became known as the Women's Auxiliary. It continued to function in this role and became active in raising funds as well as making other significant contributions.

Arrangements with Actors' Equity Association and University Regent Theatre developed and, since Syracuse University was not unionized, it was decided to create a separate corporation legally separate from Syracuse University to work with the actor's union. On January 25, 1962, the Syracuse University Theatre Corporation received a provisional not-for-profit charter from the State of New York as an independent body. The following individuals were the original officers of the not-for-profit corporation: Clark D. Ahlberg, President (Vice President, Syracuse University); Francis A. Wingate, Secretary (Vice President and Treasurer of Syracuse University); Alexander N. Charters, Secretary (Dean of University College, Syracuse University); and Victor J. Colway, Treasurer (Vice President, Business Affairs of Syracuse University).

The Board of the Syracuse University Theatre Corporation was later expanded to include members from the larger community.

By law, the Trustees had to hold meetings of the Corporation. I decided that it would be informative for them to meet with staff members and others involved with the University Regent Theatre. It was agreed that the trustees of the Syracuse University Theatre Corporation and a group of staff members from the University Regent Theatre named by the Dean of University College would hold joint meetings. This group was later expanded to include members from the community and named the Advisory Committee. There was discussion to decide which person from which organization would be chair of the meetings of the combined group. I finally decided that a person from each group would be named as chairs for the meeting. One chair presided over the first part of the meeting and the other chair took over for the second half. It was awkward at first but the arrangement worked out and it was continued.

The Syracuse University Theatre Corporation was used as a body to contract with Actors' Equity Association. It was used somewhat as an agent for actors with the University Regent Theatre. At the meetings, the trustees of the Corporation also participated in an advisory role with the so-called Advisory Committee with no power to act.

In 1964 Marlow Burt, Assistant Manager of the University Regent Theatre, received a grant of \$70,000 from the Gifford Foundation to "subsidize new professional theater and to develop and educate young audiences for the future." Nineteen area schools were involved. It was the first grant received by the University Regent Theatre.

In 1964 the Syracuse Repertory Theater was formed by University College to provide live professional theater and engaged actors through the Actors Equity Company.

In 1966, Syracuse University added a new building to the University Regent Theatre complex which contained two additional theatre spaces: the Experimental Theatre (204 seats) and the Black Box Theatre. The addition also included new office spaces and a lobby space for

the Experimental Theatre. The cost of the new construction was about \$1,000,000 and covered entirely by Syracuse University. Some funds were raised by the Theater Corporation under the chairmanship of Daniel Sutton and the remainder by Syracuse University. Later the balance owed to the University was taken from the University College Reserve Fund.

The Drama Department became increasingly involved in the University Regent Theatre. In 1963-64 the Drama Department moved into the University Regent Theatre building and thus became in effect a tenant of the University Regent Theatre. The two were housed in the same building and worked together on the same programs and yet reported to two different administrators.

In 1964 my appointment as Dean of University College ended when I was appointed Vice President for Continuing Education of Syracuse University. My successor as Dean was Dr. Clifford L. Winters who was Associate Dean of University College. University College was one of the programs that reported directly to me as Vice President for Continuing Education and as such I continued to be involved with the University Regent Theatre.

In 1963 the Syracuse Repertory Theatre was formed to produce live professional theater and other programs of the University Regent Theatre and was continued as a very successful program. It was earning respect from the growing audiences by the quality of its programs. In addition to obtaining money from ticket sales, it received money from advertising in the performance programs and from the Women's Auxiliary. All deficits were assumed by University College.

By 1971 the University Regent Theatre became independent of University College including the financial arrangement but remained a part of Syracuse University.

The Syracuse Repertory Theatre developed as a professional company with an aura of excitement and enthusiasm by the staff and by the larger Syracuse community for which it performed. It became the dominant program of the University Regent Theatre. The lack of attention by the University Repertory Theatre staff more than a lack of interest by adult students of the Syracuse community in a comprehensive program of theater related performances and activities as originally planned resulted in most the original programs being phased out. It is hopefully considered that a comprehensive program of theater related programs and theater related programs for adult students will be offered for adult students in the extended Syracuse community. It could be provided by Syracuse Stage, University College and/or by another division of Syracuse University.

The Syracuse Repertory Theater of the University Regent Theater continued to thrive. After Arthur Storch was appointed in 1973 as Artistic Director of Syracuse Repertory Theater and chair of the Drama Department, the name of the Syracuse Repertory Theater was changed to Syracuse Stage.

Alexander N. Charters

Alex Charters, a pioneer in the field of adult and continuing education, is professor emeritus, retired dean and vice president at Syracuse University. He is founder of both the International Congress on University Adult Education, the Coalition of Adult Education Organizations, and the Academic Institute for Educators of Adults. He was a delegate to the International Conference on Adult Education sponsored by UNESCO, and The Alexander N. Charters Library of Resources for Educators of Adults at Syracuse University is an internationally renowned repository. Alex is a member of the Adult and Continuing Education Hall of Fame.